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Reagan's Desert One

WASHINGTON

If you were the commander of the Islamic Jihad, victor in Beirut three times over the incompetent American military, what would you do next?

First, from your sanctuary in the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, you would request permission from Damascus to import another 3,000-pound truckload of explosives from Iran.

That permission would surely be given. Richard Murphy, the Reagan Administration official in charge of cluck-clucking when a U.S. Embassy is destroyed in Beirut, recently praised Syria for being "helpful" to America; because he is so ready to turn the other cheek, Damascus has a reason to let continue the loading of the Jihad's trucks with explosives.

Next, you would publicly state your intention to blast the Americans again soon, just as you did before the most recent bombing. This displays your contempt for American might, and it has never stimulated any special urgency in security countermeasures. Certainly such notice did not stop your suicide bomber from detonating his charge from within 10 yards of the embassy last week.

Finally, you would pick a politically suitable date and aim your truck bomb at the U.S. Ambassador's residence in the Beirut suburb of Yarze, or — if the Americans elect to reestablish their presence in West Beirut — at the embassy, whose easily penetrable defenses were exposed on CBS the other night.

Americans are coming to the realization that the Reagan response to these continued outrages will be even more pusillanimous than Jimmy Carter's protracted hand-wringing at the seizure of hostages in Teheran.

Every time the United States has been humiliated by the Syrian-Iranian-P.L.O. suicide squad, Mr. Reagan has posed before cameras to say we are not going to pull out under fire. And then he has left our front-line diplomats hostage to terrorists.

His Defense Secretary, Viscount Weinberger of Grenada, stripped our embassy of its 80 Marine guards a few months ago because he was afraid they might provoke trouble. The Pentagon argues that security of embassies is a matter for the "host country," and suggests we hire local mercenaries to protect American civilians. The State Department joins in with the alibi that "an embassy is not a fort."

But we have learned that not even our forts are forts. We have always known that Amin Gemayel's rickety regime was not an effective "host" and that what passes as a Lebanese

Government was not capable of defending our embassy from attack. The only way we can stop terrorists from driving us out of Lebanon is to stop them ourselves.

The President should stop nibbling his nails and make the tough choice. If his decision is to bug out, he should put the embassy on a ship offshore right away; if his decision is to stay, he is duty-bound to put in the power and the anti-tank traps to guarantee our citizens' safety.

That means Ronald Reagan, personally, should call in the Director of Central Intelligence and demand to know who murdered 260 American diplomats and marines in the last 18 months, and through whose checkpoints the explosives have passed. He needs to direct the Defense Secretary to make good on his promise to punish the murderers. And he must act now, today, to make certain that American diplomats in Beirut get the protection they should have been getting from the Government they serve.

All we have seen so far is impotence and incompetence, posture posing as policy. Can you imagine what Ronald Reagan would have said about weakness and lack of leadership if Jimmy Carter's C.I.A. were shrugging helplessly; if Jimmy Carter's Pentagon wanted to hide the Marine Corps and hire local gunmen to defend American honor; if Jimmy Carter had compared fatal military construction delays to the normal foot-dragging in fixing his kitchen?

The moment a truck-bomb threat was suspected at the White House, trucks loaded with sand blocked all the entrances until concrete barriers were put in place on Pennsylvania Avenue and the side streets. No tragic delays, no Weinberger defeatism about helicopters appearing if trucks were stopped.

If the President can protect the White House so quickly and effectively, he can order the airlift of similar protection of the place the American flag flies in Beirut. Mr. Reagan should stop wallowing in his victimization; if he does not have the means or guts to defend our embassy, he should have the good grace to close it down.